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Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Kirtsoglou, E. (2011) 'The marriage of heaven and hell : imagination, creativity and political agency in the inspirational night dream in Islam.', in The dream in Islam : from Qur'anic Tradition to Jihadist inspiration. Oxford: Berghahn, pp. 124-136.

Further information on publisher's website:

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*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell¹; Imagination, Creativity and Political Agency in
the Inspirational Night Dream in Islam.*

Dr. Elisabeth Kirtsoglou

University of Durham

In this bold, original and timely book Edgar captures ethnographically and restores analytically an extremely difficult subject, that of the ‘inspirational night dream in Islam’. Anthropological research on dreams is definitely not a new field (see, for example, Tedlock 1987; Edgar 1995; Mageo 2003; Stewart 2004; to name but a few). Nevertheless, the theorization and analysis of dreams in general, and the ‘true dream’ in particular, remain a difficult and awkward venture. In an earlier article (cf. Kirtsoglou 2010) I have tried to touch upon some of the reasons that make the anthropological analysis of dreams an extremely intricate endeavour. In the present paper I will try to locate this difficulty more precisely by commenting further on the relationship between dream and imagination. I will then argue in favour of a unified approach towards ‘dream’ and ‘reality’, claiming that the anthropological study of dreams allows us to appreciate the close connection between imagination, creativity and political agency.

a. The Original Sin

The night dream is unavoidably associated with human imagination. Some analysts, like Freud locate the dream in some *personal* and *private* unconscious world, while others, like Jung, prefer the concept of a *collective* unconscious. Edgar here prefers the Jungian approach to dreams because of its similarities to the Islamic tradition that allow him to focus on “the issue of how metaphorical imaginative thinking is related to cognitive understanding of the world and ourselves” (nd). It follows that in order to approach the subject of dreams, we need to firmly establish the importance of

imagination and its relation to subjectivity. Imagination is, however, a problematic topic in itself. This is because, as Castoriadis (1995) observes, the central topic of philosophy –almost since its inception- has been the study of Mind. From then onwards, all the dimensions of human subjectivity that cannot be considered as “falling under the jurisdiction of the Mind” were “attributed to the sub-thinkable, or to beyond-the-thinkable, and to indeterminacy (Castoriadis 1995: 233 my translation). The radical imagination was thus obscured and treated as abjection, as a simple and pure lack of definition, as belonging to the realm of the super-empirical, the transcendental and the vague (ibid). By consequence, imagination was reduced to a secondary role, it was made to compete against the principles of True/False, Good/Bad and Beautiful/Ugly (which were seen as being *externally guaranteed*) and it was “expelled to the realm of psychology, or explained away as relating to unfulfilled needs or desires” (Castoriadis 1995: 234 my translation and emphasis).

In its association with the radical imagination, the night dream has also been analysed as originating in the un-conscious, as being a subject that belonged primarily to psychology or psychoanalysis, and –most importantly- it was also made to compete with some externally guaranteed principle of True/False. Measured up against the empirical, tangible world of reality, the dream was always found short. At best, it were to be analysed as some kind of reworking of the awake reality. It either expressed repressed wishes and desires, or it could otherwise be studied from a semiotic approach as culturally constructed text (cf. Stewart 1997: 878).

The anthropological study of dreams faces more complications that arise from the relation between anthropologist and informant, as well as from the relation between the informant and his/her cultural context. As anthropologists and precisely because

the research process is always “negotiated and tested in an ambiguous and stressful field of interpersonal relations” (Jackson 1998: 5), we are always aware of the possibility that we might need to not take at face value *whatever* our informants tell us. In his forward and introductory essay to the present book, Lyon provides us with the perfect example of such a case, in his comment on a large public feasting event he witnessed while at the field in northern Punjab:

At the time, I asked the landlord why he chose to do something on such a grand scale and he gave me what I thought was a *playful but deceptive* explanation. He told me that Allah had come to him in a dream and told him to feed his village. Quite frankly, I dismissed the explanation out of hand. It clearly *made no sense and was a very flimsy rationale* upon which to take such a costly and time consuming decision. Nearly ten years on, I have come to the conclusion that while my analysis of the political significance of such feasting rituals was both useful and productive, it neglected something rather interesting about a critical element in the underlying inspiration for the decision (Lyon, nd. Emphasis mine).

The reason why Lyon above and the majority of anthropologists would be wary of the landlord’s explanation relates of course to our Enlightenment-shaped, reason-oriented cosmology, which dictates that whatever happens during dreams does not really exist (cf. Kirtsoglou 2010). Awake time is the only legitimate source of authentic experience and in fact we believe that it is what generates dreams. The opposite seems as a plain violation of human rationality. The anthropologist is then reluctant to seriously consider that a landlord, inspired by a dream, decided to spend money, time and resources in order to organize a large public feast. What is more, even if the anthropologist actually decides to take at face value what the informant tells him, s/he still hesitates to endorse such a seemingly *irrational* explanation in a public ethnography. This is what Argyrou (2002) calls the ‘salvation intent’.

Argyrou claims that anthropology “does not so much seek to define Others as to *redefine* them in order to redeem them” (2002: 28). Through examples from the work of Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard and Levi-Strauss, Argyrou demonstrates how anthropologists became yet and again extremely preoccupied with establishing beyond any doubt that the ‘native’ is not pre-logical and irrational (2002: 44-51). At least not more so than the Western man. With reference to dreams, Stewart discusses how Victorian anthropologists evoked the “ability to distinguish purely mental phenomena from real perceptions” as a “prime criterion for having attained civilization (2004: 76). Victorian evolutionism purported that “those who believed in the reality of dreams lacked a theory of mind” (ibid: 2004: 76) and therefore only “the savage could consider the events in his dreams to be as real as those of his waking hours” (Lubbock 1978 [1870]: 126 cited in Stewart 2004: 76). In order to deal with this apparent problem of native belief in dreams without portraying our informants as pre-logical, irrational, superstitious, or backwards we often resort to treating the dream as a rhetorical device. Thus, our informant might tell us that she or he acted upon a ‘true dream’, but we conclude that what they actually meant by this was something else. We convince ourselves (and the world) that the ‘true dream’ must surely be a kind of cultural symbolism, or an excuse, or an evasive maneuver to our persisting questions. Edgar refuses to succumb to this logic and prefers the option of actually trying to ethnographically and analytically capture local beliefs about the true inspirational dream. However precarious this option may be, Edgar does not see dreams just as cultural texts or rhetorical devices. He thus avoids an entirely semiotic approach in favor of a phenomenological appreciation of the dream as experience (cf. Stewart 1997: 878).

The anthropological approach to dreams however, harbors yet more dangers for we can never have *direct* access to someone else's dreams. We are then confined to working with someone's narrative story of a dream never being entirely sure whether the dream actually took place, or what happened in it (cf. Kirtsoglou 2010). Our inability to share directly an informant's dream experience violates in a sense the 'participant-observation' dimension of fieldwork. However, as I have argued elsewhere, anthropologists often rely on narratives in order to engage with cultural analysis and dream narratives need not pose an exception (ibid). If we resist the radical break between dream-time and awake reality and accept that dream-time and awake time influence each other generatively and in a symmetrical fashion, we can then refuse to cast away dreams in the realm of the vague and the indeterminate (cf. Kirtsoglou 2010). Whether we believe anthropology to be an art, a science or a discipline, we cannot accept the arbitrary compartmentalization of the social self and the social mind that the radical separation of dream-time and awake-time entails (ibid). For we have no apparent evidence that 'reality' is what shapes dreams, while – as this book clearly shows- we have ample ethnographic material which demonstrates the opposite. To decide that we do not take this material at face value is an entirely feasible decision, but we must remember that it is a capricious decision that *we* made on the basis that *we* refused to abandon *our* cosmological beliefs in favor of those of Others.

b. *Every thing possible to be believ'd is an image of truth.*

As I argued in the previous section, dreams are not just rhetorical devices, cultural texts, or residuals of our waking time. Rather, they need to be analysed as experiences and as instances of the human imagination. Such a statement presupposes of course that we recover the importance of imagination in the shaping of subjectivity, but

before I proceed to comment on that, I would like to briefly inquire into the inspirational Jihadist dream. In the story of Mullah Omar recounted in the present book we learn that “before he attacks some place he dreams, and then in the morning he orders a commander to attack that place” (Arabshahi 1998 in Edgar nd.). We also learn that Omar’s brother has dreamt of the White House on fire before the attacks on 9/11, with no possibility of actually knowing that the attacks would happen (Edgar nd.). Edgar also attests that several Muslims had what they claimed to be prophetic dreams of the events of 9/11. Those dreams involved planes falling on tall buildings, or soccer players dressed as pilots winning a game against the US.

Even if –after considerable theorisation- we accept that we should not dismiss our informants’ beliefs that dream experiences can guide waking-time experiences, we still have a problem accepting that dreams can actually anticipate the future. Such a statement is a direct shot in our system of rational thinking. The anticipatory character of the Islamic dream is even more difficult to swallow than Allah’s divine nature. Edgar here advocates two main exegetical lines on the issue of divine inspiration that Jihadists report to have received. First, he observes that dream narratives in part legitimate Jihadist actions. According to this explanation, “*jihadist* leaders and their followers adopt such dream narratives for propagandist purposes in the knowledge that faithful Muslims believe in the possibility of such divinely-inspired night dreams” (Edgar nd). Second, he claims that:

“particular dream motifs (such as the Prophet and his companions) are part of a shared visionary world which can connect present day believers with the [mythically] real past, and especially with the imagined early glorious days of Islam, the time of the Prophet himself. Moreover, such true dreams appear to facilitate the re-enactment of this past in the present” (ibid).

Edgar is careful to tell us that Jihadist dreams need to be understood in the context of the Islamic world view according to which “the dreamworld is experienced as more real than this world, and reality becomes more dreamlike”. Thus sacred figures (like that of Allah) are not “unreal projections of the unconscious, or deeply encoded manifestations or earlier dysfunctional familial experiences, like they would be in Western interpretations, but figures that inhabit the supernaturally real world of Islam and reassert the eternal truths of the Qur’ an and the *hadiths*” (Edgar nd).

In my attempt to offer a meta-commentary on Edgar’s analysis here, I am inclined to focus on the second exegetical thread. In the Islamic world, true dreams are not regarded as originating in the ‘unconscious’, or as being residuals of ‘reality’. They are taken to be as authentic as waking time experiences and the figures who appear in them are perceived to be as real as those of waking reality.

In theoretical terms we can accept the continuity between dream-time and awake-time as well as the connection between dream and imagination. What we cannot easily accept is the existence of supernatural beings, gods and saints; and we do not need to. Allah and the concept of Jihad do not exist because people dream of them. Rather they exist equally in dream-time and in awake time. They belong to the collective imaginary of the Muslim people. Dreaming of them is thus deeply established in culture, history and the religious cosmology of Muslims and it is analogous to praying to them in awake time. In our appreciation of the inspirational true dream in Islam, we must disentangle the religious belief in the supernatural from imagination and experience that are present simultaneously and uninterruptedly in the dream and in reality.

Still, we must solve another puzzle. How is it possible for people who had no prior knowledge of the 9/11 plans to report dreams that clearly seem to anticipate those tragic events? I argue that the answer to the problem of the ‘anticipatory’ nature of jihadist dreams may lie in a rather simple thought. Several concepts and notions, like religion and art for instance, have been born independently in the minds of people across cultures and over the course of history. The idea of setting recognizable symbols of US political and economic dominance, like the White House or the WTD, on fire is much less complex and a lot more ‘predictable’ than art and religion. This is how Baudrillard commented on the events of 9/11:

The fact that we had dreamt of this event, that everyone without exception has dreamt of it –because no one can avoid dreaming of the destruction of any power that has become hegemonic of this degree- is unacceptable to the Western moral conscience. Yet it is a fact, and one which indeed can be measured by the emotive violence of all that has been said and written in the effort to dispel it (2002: 5).

When Baudrillard admits that we have all ‘dreamt’ of this event, he means ‘imagined’ it, and even perhaps ‘fantasized’ about it. In the Westernⁱⁱ cosmological order we accept that we imagine, plan, create, fantasize in our waking reality because of our own specific ontological suppositions about human subjectivity. In the Islamic cosmology however, where dream-time and reality are not radically separated, it is almost ‘natural’ –if I may- for people to have dreamt of these events in both their sleep-time and awake time. Jihad and the attacks of 9/11 did not happen *because* people have *dreamt* (in their sleep) of them, but because they, too, have dreamt of them, (imagined them in their sleep), which in this case is no different than to say that a non-Muslim person imagined them in their awake time. Edgar is right to claim that “militant *jihadism* can be directly authorized by dream content”. The originality of Edgar’s thought lies in the fact that he is careful to explicate the Islamic view of the

relationship between dream and reality, thus setting the context for understanding this statement. In a cosmological setting where people see no radical break between dream and reality, the above statement does not invite us to think that jihad leaders (or the pious Muslims who follow them) are irrational, superstitions and pre-logical. Militant *jihadism* is authorized by dream content in the same sense that any war can be authorized by any belief in someone's awake-time.

Edgar also claims that –partly at least- such jihadist dream narratives are legitimatizing discourses developed for propagandist purposes. I do not –and cannot in fact- disagree with this line of thought. Jihadist dreams may equally well be rhetorical and legitimizing devices. However, as Edgar's second line of thinking clearly shows, they are most probably not *just* that. Once we circumvent our tendency to measure up imagination and the dream with an externally guaranteed truth we realize that the inspirational dream, as it is theorized in this book, touches upon a crucial anthropological preoccupation with political agency. In order however to appreciate the role and importance of imagination in human creativity, we need to first look the radical imagination in the eye and accept that human subjects are capable of imagining, conceptualizing and then realizing the absolute good and bad, beautiful and ugly. And we also need to accept that those terms even –along with truth and all its opposites- are themselves effects of the radical imagination and not externally guaranteed principles that fell from the sky.

c. As I was walking among the fires of hell, delighted with the enjoyments of Genius; which to Angels look like torment and insanity.

Most people would be ready to agree that politics is a dirty business. At the same time however our romantic, Rousseaudian view of some fundamentally noble human

nature pictures the political *vision* to be something righteous and gallant. History and experience, however, provides us with unpleasant and bitter surprises. Not all political visions come to resemble that of Martin Luther King. In fact very few do.

By examining the notion of the true dream in Islam, and more specifically the jihadist dream, Edgar skates on thin ice. Unavoidably, he negotiates issues like religious fundamentalism, irrationality and most of all what Loizos calls “a totalizing doctrine of responsibility, a crude, disordered folk-legal doctrine... [that is] generalizing and collectivist and very hostile to both the idea of *individual* responsibility and to causal and contextual specificity” (1988: 649-50). As I have argued elsewhere, jihad (and terrorism as its extreme expression that saw its culmination in the 9/11 attacks) does not need to be analysed as a pre-modern system of accountability (cf. Kirtsoglou 2006). This totalizing doctrine which predicates that the imagined community of the Other is responsible in its abstraction for real or ‘assumed’ crimes and therefore liable to their consequences (cf. Wilkins 1992: 134) might not be just ‘a cultural survival of premodern societies’ (cf. Dimitrakos 2001: 138). Rather, it could be seen as “an element embedded in the very idea of nation-states as imagined communities who continue to hold each other collectively accountable for the actions of their respective fictive kin-groups” (Kirtsoglou 2006: 72). I do not wish to expand on political systems of accountability here. What concerns me at the moment is the limits of human imagination, and more precisely the lack of such limits.

Political barbarism (or whatever might seem as political barbarism by different groups of people) is not a new phenomenon and it does not limit itself to ‘exotic’, ‘premodern’, ‘kin-based’, ‘native’ societies. Genocide, perhaps the ultimate expression of political barbarism, is not even restricted to the fringes of Europe,

places like Serbia, Kosovo, or Armenia. Sadly, and whether we like it or not Hitler too had a *vision*. His *vision*, his *awake dream* was to exterminate the Jewish population and to establish the ultimate and unequivocal dominion of Germany over Europe and perhaps beyond. I do not know if Hitler was also dreaming of that venture in his sleep. Perhaps he did and it makes no actual difference. What matters here is to establish that political visions are not always noble because the human imagination stretches boundlessly both towards what we have termed good and towards what we have termed bad. What is more disturbing perhaps is the thought that supernatural figures like Allah, play no different teleological role in this process than beliefs in the superiority of a certain race, or of a certain system of social organization. Once war and the killing of other human beings we never met has been *conceived* and *imagined*, there can be various reasons for actually being realized –all of them equally rational or irrational depending from which point of view we look at them, and which value system we have come to worship as worthy of our lives and those of others. Perhaps the most ironic vulnerability of human beings is their tendency to fervently believe in the very things they have invented and imagined –nations as imagined communities (cf. Anderson 1983) being just an example of this and not the most innocent one in human history. By arguing this I do not wish to ‘redeem’ Edgar’s informants, or offer justifications for dream-authorised jihad. I merely want to pinpoint that our analysis of what ‘dream-authorised’ or ‘Allah-guided’ is, needs not to be clouded by the apparent ‘strangeness’, or assumed ‘irrationality’ of such concepts, for we can find analogues and homologues in less religious-driven and ‘transcendental’ contexts. Having established this claim –I believe- I now wish to turn to the importance of the radical imagination and dream as an instance of it, with no self-reproach.

d. *What is now proved was once, only imagin'd.*

I ended the penultimate section with a precarious statement that could easily afford considerable misunderstanding. I claimed that concepts like good, bad, truth, beauty and ugliness are themselves products of the radical imagination. By this statement I do not wish to take a position in the debates of moral, aesthetic or scientific relativism. What I mean is that man (sic) *imagined* those concepts in the first place. Such principles are therefore the result of invention, of human creation. To argue the opposite, would necessarily mean to accept that they were *given*, presumably by some supernatural being and thus cast such notions away to the realm of the transcendental. *If we agree however that all such concepts are the result of the radical imagination, it becomes plainly clear why human imagination cannot in fact be measured up against its own products (i.e., true/false, good/bad, beautiful/ugly);* and the same is true for all the expressions of the radical imagination, dream being one of them.

Dreams cannot be dismissed away as false, non real, ugly or evil, much in the same manner that they cannot be venerated –so to speak- as true, prophetic (in the sense of carrying messages from an other world), good, or beautiful (in the sense of providing us with the measure of goodness or beauty). *If dreams cannot produce reality in an one way manner, then neither reality can produce dreams in this fashion.* Both our awake time and our dream time are parts of our social, cultural and historically informed self and they produce each other much in the same way they are produced by each other. They are (to borrow a phrase by Bourdieu) structuring structured idioms of human subjectivity and in fact of human *intersubjectivity*. For, we might dream alone but the self who dreams is never a solitary and pre-cultural entity. At the same time our culture and social life is itself a product of our imagination and by extension, also part of our sleep/awake time and dreams.

The aforementioned idea finds its perfect expression in the work of Castoriadis, especially in his theorization of *vis formandi*, or, as he states:

... “the acknowledgement of the basic fact that one cannot ‘explain’ either the birth of society or the course of history by natural factors, be they biological or other, any more than by the ‘rational’ activity of the ‘rational’ being (man). From the start of history one sees the emergence of radical novelty, and if we do not wish to resort to transcendental factors to account for this, we definitely must postulate a power of creation, a *vis formandi*, immanent to human collectivities as well as to individual human beings...Language, customs, norms, and technique cannot ‘be explained’ by factors extrinsic to human collectivities” (2007: 72).

The power of creation, the *vis formandi* is therefore a sine-qua-non of the human existence and it is constitutive of human subjectivity as much as it is constituted by it, but it is also constitutive of the social, cultural and historical sphere. This dialectic and poetic relationship between the *instituting* and the *instituted* imaginary is precisely what makes the dream such an important topic of anthropological enquiry and the present work of Edgar such a significant contribution to anthropological knowledge.

Edgar does not dismiss the inspirational potential of dreams. As a consequence he theoretically implicates himself in the discussion of political structure and agency in a unique manner. His work demonstrates beyond any doubt that the human imagination produces structure as much as it is produced by it, but not always in some obscure and time-consuming fashion. The Islamic dream (of jihad or not) is an instance of spontaneous creation. This is not to say that the dream does not carry in its veins history, myth and what Smith (1986) would have termed the *ethnie*. The dream is firmly established in the collective imaginary of Muslim people and connects the past with the present. It is also shaping that imaginary in “class-less”, “status-less”

(compare with Mullah Omar), “education-less” ways. The ability to influence history, becomes (peculiarly to Western standards) open to all, for all are the sons and daughters of Allah. This is a process much different from the technohistorical processes which in their necessity for economic and educational elites fit the European societies (cf. Gellner 1983; Anderson 1983). The difference between dream-based political agency and awake-time one is that the former (in the Islamic world at least) does not need further legitimization. It is open to all, acute and effective –and perhaps, because of these very qualities, ‘strange’ and difficult to accept by the Western mind that has been trained to acknowledge the truth only when it comes from legitimate (read already legitimized by some other discourse) sources. In reality however, all kinds of political agency and all kinds of ‘legitimate sources’ of it have been at one time or another ‘invented’, ‘imagined’ and realized albeit perhaps not so fast as in the case of dream-based agency.

In its contribution to our understanding of political agency, Edgar’s work has of course consequences for the theorization of agency in general. The dream as an instance of the human imagination proves to be central in the anthropological discussion of subjectivity. In its embodied character it offers itself as a unique context for bringing together different approaches to structure and the role of creativity as shaping it and being shaped by it.

Undoubtedly the Foucauldian view of the subject as the result of a regime of truth has dominated the social sciences in recent years. Inspired by Foucauldian thinking, Butler claims that what we can be “is constrained in advance by a regime of truth that decides what will and will not be a recognizable form of being” (2005: 23). At the same time though, most theorists are ready to accept that the Foucauldian ‘regime of

truth', does not foreclose agency, since it 'does not fully constrain the formation of the self' (ibid). Edgar's analysis of the true inspirational dream in Islam engages with an expanded sense of the self and demonstrates clearly 'the dynamism of the psyche' (nd). The dreaming self is a 'self becoming', but it s/he is also a 'whole self', never at once with his/her consciousness (cf. Kirtsoglou 2004); a self where emotions, intuitions, pre-reflexive subjectivity and social meaning are finally united. The unfinished, unpredictable quality of dreams allows us to analytically approach non-verbal forms of being; embodied, narrativized, deeply social and historical, but nonetheless more visual and experiential than verbal and semiotic. Edgar's analysis constitutes an answer to McNay's claim that "agency cannot be conceptualized through universal models of recognition" (2008: 11). For, the true inspirational dream in Islam has been indeed an ethnographically and analytically neglected "indirect route of power", which nevertheless clearly "connects identity formations to the invisible structures underlying them" (ibid).

The inspirational true dream is then a space of subject formation, but also of the formation of the 'moral subject' (cf. Butler 2005). Edgar's study thus reveals another dimension of the relationship between power and dreams. Dreams evoke meaning and manage to place social actors in the context of history in unprecedented ways. They clearly manifest what Castoriadis refers to as 'ontological creation', that is, the creation of new forms and institutions which nevertheless belongs "densely and massively to the socio-historical being" (2007: 73). Allah-guided dreams are then settings and means through which subjects engage in dialogue with their own subjectivity and history; and this is an idiom of agency that requires careful anthropological consideration for its significance, wider theoretical and analytical repercussions, as well as for its originality.

Last but not least, Edgar's insistence in taking his informants seriously provides us with an invaluable methodological lesson and enforces our convictions about the unbreakable continuity between ethnography and theory. Rather than 'analyzing his subjects', Edgar engages here in the ethnographic appreciation of new motifs of power, agency and structure, by carefully listening to the voices of his informants, and by not rushing to dismiss their beliefs or mask them with intricate and politically/scientifically correct interpretations. His anthropological intuition and analytical sensitivity resulted in the present book, which is itself evidence of the fact that *one thought, fills immensity*.

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ⁱ The first part of my title is borrowed by William Blake's 1974 homonymous work, as are the titles of the subsections and more particularly: "As I was walking among the fires of hell, delighted with the enjoyments of Genius; which to Angels look like torment and insanity" (William Blake *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, A memorable fancy, verses 1-2. "What is now proved was once, only imagin'd. (William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Proverbs of Hell, verse 33. "One thought, fills immensity" (ibid: verse 37). "Every thing possible to be believ'd is an image of truth" (ibid: verse 39).

ⁱⁱ My use of the term West and Western in this document does not intend to re-enforce Occidentalism. It is figurative and does not seek to obscure the internal differentiations of the abstraction we call 'western culture'. It rather refers to a system of thought and even more so to the social representation of that system, to our belief that somehow and despite 'the differences within' this particular imagined community exists.